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Leading Ideas



Small Churches as Healthy Family Systems

By Lewis A. Parks On February 14, 2007

Leading Ideas

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While teaching pastoral care and counseling to a group of licensed pastors who serve small membership churches, I decided that a lecture on family systems would be just the ticket. Students of the pioneering work of Murray Bowen and Edwin Friedman have been applying family systems analysis to the realities of small membership churches for almost two decades. Repeatedly I hear my clergy colleagues warn of the dysfunctional family systems found in small churches. "They'll try to triangulate you at every turn," my colleagues warn. "They're great on scapegoating," they say, and "God help you if you cross the matriarch!" So, thinking the licensed pastors should be alerted to these problems, I introduced family systems to the class.

“ What does a healthy family system and a healthy family-like small church look like? If you flip all those symptoms of a dysfunctional family system upside down, what do you see?

Many of the basic concepts of family systems theory (the family as emotional system, triangulating relationships, self-differentiation, scapegoating, family secrets, etc.) assume that things are not as they should be. The therapist asks, "What is *wrong* with this family that this individual member should come to me presenting this symptom?" The pastor familiar with family systems theory observes patterns of triangulation here, a family secret there, and the misdirection of scapegoating over there. As you might guess, the students began to respond from ample personal experience. Family systems theory connects with life in many small membership churches. What a wonderful roast we had in class that day!

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But I went away feeling uncomfortable. If these small church pastors were not ecclesiastical hypochondriacs before they heard my lecture, they would be afterward. It was all too easy to name the pathologies. As one who claims the spiritual gift of encouragement, I must do better by these students.

Although family systems theory is fundamentally critical, it does assume the possibility of healthy family systems and healthy congregations with family-like dynamics. I rewrote the next day's lecture with one simple question in mind: *What does a healthy family system and a healthy family-like small church look like?* If you flip all those symptoms of a dysfunctional family system upside down, what do you see?

It was an exercise in imagination, a search for counter stories to the dominating stories of small churches as depressed and dysfunctional social units. And it worked! As I drew outlines of healthy family systems and healthy small congregations, the pastors filled in the colors. Some even indicated a new resolve to stay with their symptom-laden congregations and work through the dysfunctions rather than search for the greener grass of another appointment.

I offer the following list of reworked basic concepts of family systems theory applied to small membership churches with the hope that leaders of small churches might be encouraged to search for the counter stories beneath the symptoms of dysfunction.

1. The sociological unit that most resembles an extended family is a small congregation.
2. In a healthy family and a healthy small church, members know that they become more together than the sum of their parts. They are part of a story larger than themselves.
3. In a healthy family and a healthy small church, members want to get together; it is rewarding. They need to catch up.
4. In a healthy family and a healthy small church, the inflow of new energy can come from several directions, and the group will achieve new balance.
5. In a healthy family and a healthy small church, there is the ability to name and face, rather than deny, real threats.
6. In a healthy family and a healthy small church, members communicate directly with each other and their leaders. Message bearers are translators, not gossips.
7. In a healthy family and a healthy small church, the leader is a self-differentiated, non-anxious presence.
8. In a healthy family and a healthy small church, the leader stays in touch with the constituencies via "soft information" (overheard bits and pieces, ear to the ground data).
9. In a healthy family and a healthy small church, all agree that after Jesus Christ, there is no more need for scapegoats. (Isaiah 53; Hebrews 9: 23-28)
10. In a healthy family and a healthy small church, members take responsibility for actions, apologize when required, and make restitution where possible.
11. In a healthy family and a healthy small church, God's deliverance is experienced in the breaking of negative family legacies and the beginning of new and positive ones. (Genesis 12:1-3; Jeremiah 31:29-34; Mark 3:31-35)
12. In a healthy family and a healthy small church, those who have "crossed over" before us are remembered and released.
13. In a healthy family and a healthy small church, members and leaders are growing in self-awareness, including awareness of the assets and liabilities of their birth order.
14. In a healthy family and a healthy small church, members can identify the unresolved issues of previous relationships rather than project them onto their new relationships.
15. In a healthy family and a healthy small church, persons grow up and contribute or start their own stories.
16. In a healthy family and a healthy small church, there are glimpses of the future reign of God on earth.

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About Author

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Dr. Lew Parks has served churches of all sizes as a United Methodist pastor and superintendent. As he continues to direct the Doctor of Ministry program at Wesley Theological Seminary and teach, he is pastor of Calvary United Methodist Church in Lemoyne, Pennsylvania. He also assists denominational leaders around vitality in small membership churches and is author of *Preaching in the Small Membership Church* (Abingdon Press, 2009) and *Small on Purpose: Life in a Significant Church* (Abingdon Press, 2017) [Cokesbury | Amazon].

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